

“A FATAL MIRAGE”

An Extract from Mrs. N.G. Sturt – LIFE OF CHARLES STURT (Chapter XXII)

Sturt and Frome explored much new land in the outlying districts while pushing on the surveys nearer home. Their first high hopes were disappointed by the barren regions to the north-west and at the head of Spencer's Gulf. Nor did immediate benefit result from an expedition to Mount Bryan, notable for perilous achievement no less than for its tragic ending. Yet that journey inspired Pullen to fresh efforts towards the navigation of the Murray; and the Bryan range, now first visited, was destined within a few years to reveal treasures which saved the fortunes of the colony.

Sturt's account of this excursion in the 'Register' of Saturday, January 4, 1840, is in the following brief narrative much compressed, though at the same time supplemented by certain details related to his sons and by contemporary letters from Gawler to his wife (December 15, 1839), and to Torrens (January 5, 1840).

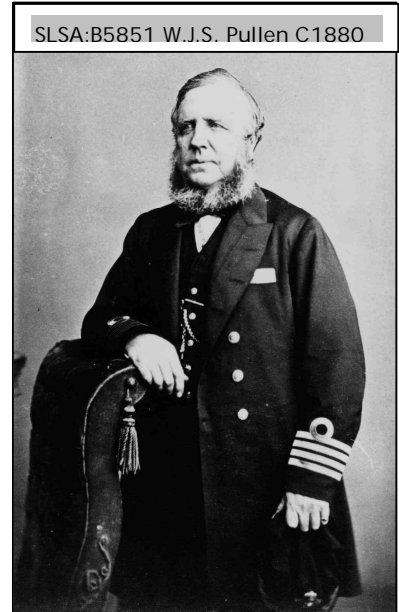
The plan of campaign was discussed in November 1839 by Gawler and Sturt. They proposed to cross Lake Alexandrina from Currency Creek (near the present town of Goolwa), to proceed up the Murray to the Great Bend, and thence to return overland to Adelaide. The objects in view were 'to examine the land along the river, with the hope of finding fertile country in the northern interior, and also to determine the capabilities of river and lake for inland navigation.'



SLSA PRG50/34/6: Junction of the Murray & Lake Alexandrina 1839 by John Skipper

Miss Gawler was eager to accompany her father; and though Sturt, better aware of the arduous work before them, demurred at first to this suggestion, he finally yielded even to Gawler's further stipulation that Mrs. Sturt should join the party. The children were transferred to Mrs. Gawler's care at Government House; and on November 22 Colonel and Miss Gawler, Captain and Mrs. Sturt, with Inman (chief of the police), Bryan (a young fellow on a visit to the Gawlers), their friend Gell, and two attendants, drove and rode to Onkaparinga, whence two days' journey on horseback brought them to Currency Creek.

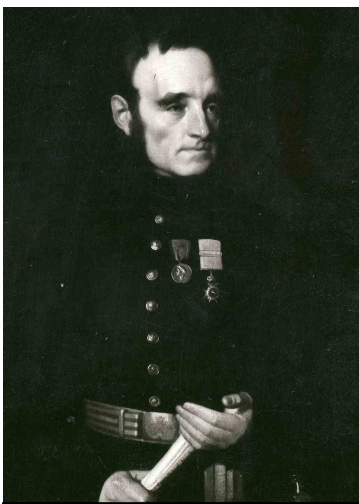
Here Sturt and Pullen took charge of the little fleet of four boats, which on the 26th, spreading sail to a fair south wind, sped across the Lake. That night the party encamped on 'Point Sturt' (the western point), whence they enjoyed a fine unbroken view of the lake to where 'seawards the sand-hummocks glittered in the evening sun.' A change of wind hindered them from entering the river proper till the 28th. Near 'Pomundi' the troublesome curiosity of a large tribe of natives showed that Sturt's hesitation to take ladies into the wilds was not groundless. One of these blacks was taken on with the party to tell the native names of prominent points. Sturt's chart was again in request, for Pullen was carrying on his survey of the lake and river; while the other officers were constantly in the saddle examining the adjacent country.



SLSA:B5851 W.J.S. Pullen C1880

Thus the progress up the river was intentionally slow; and not till December 10 were the tents pitched at the North-West Bend. On the arrival of horses and supplies from Adelaide, Gawler, Sturt, Inman, and Craig prepared to start for the north. 'Mr. Bryan, however, with the spirit natural to youth, begged so hard to be of the party, that the Governor at last consented to take him also.'

With a week's provisions and two barrels of water, this party started on the 11th, making to the north-west for a distant mountain, which Gawler at once named Mount Bryan, after his young friend. Beyond the river scrub, on the higher level of the fossil formation, the sandy plains were not devoid of good grass. But at the first night's bivouac, thirty-two miles from the river, so much water had leaked and evaporated that a quart only could be spared for each horse. At noon next day a distant northerly range was seen rising from a valley with lofty gum-trees. These hopeful signs Sturt too truly attributed to refraction; and, seeing the failure of the water-casks, and realising that the mountains were far more distant than they appeared, he strongly urged instant return to the river. None of the others, however, could believe that the view before them was unreal. Alas! from the next hill, after a long ride westward, the 'illusion was at once dispelled. The smiling valley, the fine trees had vanished; the ranges were thrown back to unattainable distance; bare and brown stretched the level plains as far as the eye could see without a promise of water in any direction.'



SLSA:B14428 Col. G. Gawler

The position was truly critical. A second day of extreme heat had left scarcely a drop in the barrels. Sturt's advice that, after a short rest, the cool night hours should be used for a forced retreat was unanimously approved. Unfortunately at sunset a native fire on Mt Bryan decoyed his companions from the path of prudence. In vain Sturt urged the difficulty of following so slight a beacon on a mountain in the dark; in vain he declared that the twelve miles of apparent distance would be at least doubled before they could reach Mount Bryan. In vain finally, to spare the failing horses, he begged that he and Inman should seek on foot the native camp and should make an unmistakable signal in case of finding water. Gawler hesitated, but allowed less wary counsels to prevail.

At seven the party set out; and at midnight, after riding full twenty five miles, halted on a high part of Mount Bryan. With daylight began a frenzied but unsuccessful search for water, the eager governor wearying out both himself and his fine horse in unavailing efforts. All to no purpose. Impetuous torrents had furrowed the hills;

the dry main channel tantalized the searchers. Gawler found ashes near a native hut, but nowhere a drop of water. There may be doubt as to the prudence of the night march to mount Bryan, but the disappointment was ruin. Another day of tremendous heat had risen; none of the party had tasted water since the previous morning; the horses had only one quart apiece since they left the river sixty five miles away.

At eleven the Governor, feeling ill, decided to wait till sunset, and then to push for the river. Sturt, anxious that Gawler should regain the camp as soon as possible, persuaded him and Bryan on the strongest of the horses to precede the more heavily equipped party, and gave them careful bearings by landmarks and compass. Gawler and Bryan therefore started at 5 P.M. on the 13th (Friday), fully intending to send relief to their comrades on the exhausted horses.



N.W. angle of the Murray. - Colonel Gawler's Camp.

Sturt, Inman, and Craig did not get away till 7 P.M. They then pressed on all night, only stopping for an hour at 3 am. to rest and to take bearings. On Saturday, the 14th, by a quarter past nine the thermometer stood at 92°; and the horses flagged grievously. By half-past ten Inman began to waver from his steady course, and Craig was much exhausted. At twelve a halt was imperative; but Sturt, seeing the value of every moment, and now supposing himself within twelve miles of the camp, dragged on his party again at one - Craig now lying on his horse - Inman galloping forward and throwing himself under a bush for relief. At three Inman and Craig gave in. It was clear that they would not move that day, and it was equally clear that, without some relief, they would never move again.

In this extremity Sturt bled one of the three horses left, rejecting the cart-horse as too much reduced in strength. All partook of this desperate remedy, Sturt very sparingly-more to moisten the parched mouth and throat than from any sensible decay of strength. Inman, after swallowing a full quart, fell into sound sleep; Craig, who took a larger quantity, was ill from the effects, and only slept from exhaustion.

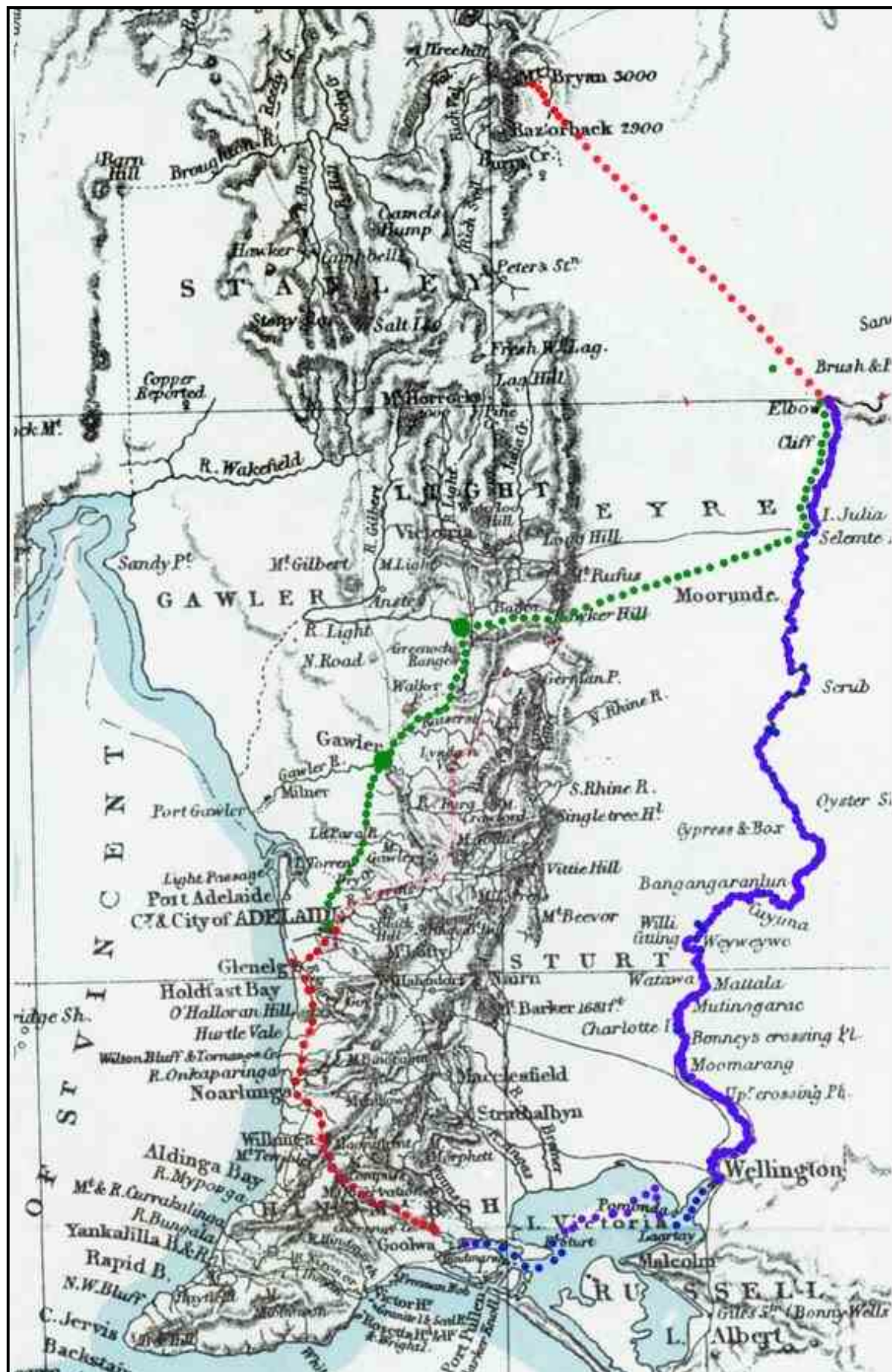
Gawler and Bryan by 7 am. on the 14th had come within twelve miles of the camp. The Governor's horse then refused to move beyond a walk; and Gawler, in his anxiety to obtain speedy relief for the main party, consented to exchange horses with Bryan, whom with compass and careful bearings he left, apparently strong and in good spirits, eating with his damper a quantity of small wild fruit. In less than an hour at only four miles further by half-past 2 am on the 15th they gained the river! Sturt made his companions halt while he brought them each a bottle of water; nor would he refresh himself till after thus attending to their wants. While tea was being made he also carefully brought for the horses four bottlesful apiece, and let them feed before after they parted, Gawler, overpowered by a sudden hot wind, dismounted, and, having first fortunately tethered his horse, fell into broken slumber.

He knew not how long it was ere he roused himself and remounted, arriving at the camp to find Sturt's party there before him. Relief was at once sent for the missing Bryan, though no doubt was felt that he would soon rejoin his friends. But in different directions the country was vainly searched; and a boat sent down the river returned with no better result.

On Monday, the 16th, Sturt and Inman with a native lad took up the quest. Tracking back to the spot where Gawler and Bryan had parted, they with difficulty followed a horse's hoof-prints five miles through the bush. Here Bryan had slept, and here he had stripped for a long walk, for they found his blankets, coat, and stockings, and Gawler's saddle, bridle, and telescope. On a scrap of paper the poor fellow had written that he had been detained by exhaustion, but was going to the south-southeast.

This was dated 9 pm. Sunday. A second careful search at this spot disclosed the tree to which he had tethered his horse. The animal on escaping had taken a course due west to the hills with his rope trailing after him, and he eventually found his way back to Adelaide But no search could disclose even to a native's piercing eye any footprint or other mark in the direction indicated. Repeated efforts were made; they examined every bush, fired at intervals, constantly shouted; but to no purpose, nor was any further trace of 'Bryan' ever found.

The Party's Journey by Land
The Party's Journey by Water
Estimated Direction of their Return



Memorial Cairn Erected on the summit of Mount Bryan in 2002

The first European to see the mountain now known as Mt. Bryan was the Explorer 'Edward John Eyre' who explored the area in July 1839. It was next explored and climbed in December 1839, by 'Governor Gawler', 'Captain Charles Sturt' and party which included the young man, 'Henry Bryan', in whose honour 'Gawler' named the feature. In 1842, the Colonial Surveyor, Lieutenant 'Edward Frome' further explored the area and erected a cairn on the site. 'Frome' is also reputed to have been the first European to ascend to the actual summit. He later again visited the area, at which time he climbed to the summit and made a number of sketches. The summit of Mt. Bryan later became a Government Water Reserve and tragically, in 1970, the S.A. Water Authority demolished 'Frome's' historic cairn to make way for other engineering works. In 2002, 'Glen Tiver', whose forebears owned the property "Rupera", which encompassed Mt. Bryan and its environs, erected this replacement cairn in memory of them and the early explorers. As shown, the replacement cairn, now bears four commemorative plaques in memory of 'Edward John Eyre', 'Gawler, Sturt and Bryan', 'Edward Frome' and three generations of the "Tiver" family.

